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PANDEMIC REVERBERATIONS IN THE LIFE OF FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS: A
READING OF 'A LIFE LESS ORDINARY'

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ABSTRACT

Women domestic workers are one of the most exploited sections of the society nowadays. Indeed, our country is witnessing a constant increase in the number of domestic workers. In fact, the women make up the vast majority of domestic workers worldwide. In India, there are four million domestic workers as per the NSSO data and, the unofficial data puts it even as high as 90 million. The economic impact of Covid-19 pandemic has created a set of scenarios which amplified the entrenched inequities of the marginalized sections especially domestic workers both in formal and informal sectors. For many domestic workers in India, so much has changed in terms of stigma and the subjugation ever since the pandemic started. The autobiography named Alo Andhari (A Life Less Ordinary) delineates the arduous journey Baby Halder, a domestic worker had to get to grips with. This paper traces out the perpetual conflicting forces and the repercussions of pandemic in the life of women domestic workers. The paper also focuses on the strenuous journey of Baby Halder from unreflecting passive woman to a writer capable of evoking all suppressed and poignant moments.

Keywords: Women domestic workers, stigma, resistance, pandemic

The domestic workers bear the brunt of the Covid-19 crisis. They are subjected to a higher degree of all kinds of exploitation. Some of them have been relieved out of their jobs without adequate payments. Those who work in urban residential colonies have lost their jobs owing to the restriction of the entry of these people. Most often domestic work is devalued in India whether Covid-19 or not. In this conundrum, their services go unnoticed. The fault lines in our society worsened the situation of domestic workers. Owing to the nature of their work the employers started looking at them as carriers of the disease even though it is not the disease of the poor. The need of the hour is to provide a safe work environment for domestic workers and enable them to minimise the socio-economic hurdle. Most importantly, domestic work has to be recognised as productive labour for attaining welfare in terms of social and economic condition for domestic workers. The women domestic workers have been facing the deep-rooted injustice for decades. The non-payment of wages owing to the Covid-19 crisis has left the most of the families of the domestic workers at the risk of poverty and hunger. Thus, in a way the pandemic has exacerbated the already existing issues. Despite the contribution of domestic workers is large, most of the time, their works are not dignified much.

As a lockdown owing to the pandemic got underway, the terrible effects on these people are heightened like reduced wages, withheld salaries, the risk of poverty and hunger, the insecurity for live in domestic workers due to the vulnerabilities of getting viral infection from people in homes they work etc. Most importantly, due to lack of income, they become the victims of domestic violence. They face atrocities and the rage of uncouth partners.

'A Life Less Ordinary', an acclaimed work which is in fact the translation of an autobiography in Bengali named 'Alo Andhari' by Baby Halder, deals with the overwhelming challenges she faced by growing up as a domestic worker.

Abandoned by her mother at her young age and the constant bickering between her father and stepmother, the lingering tension between herself and her abusive husband, who was in fact a man twice her age, she could battle the doleful circumstances in her early life. To escape from the hard drudges of her life, she flew along with her three children to Delhi, a domestic help in most of the city's wealthiest homes. But it was another beginning of a never-ending reel of misery. She had to lead a life which is howled in agony in all aspects. In her book she vividly recollects the employer's persistent dreadful attitude and the staggering workload which have made her exhausted and desperate. To escape destitution, she had to send her eldest son to work for abusive employers. She had to bear terrible treatment of her employers. Once her boss locked her children in the attic all day while she worked. She speaks of one employer "As soon as she sat down, I'd offer her tea, water, sherbet, whatever she wanted. Then I had to massage her head or her feet or whatever: the work was never ending." (Halder, 129). Most often in the case of domestic workers the employer – employee relation is a complex one. The inhuman attitude of such employers could be seen in the experiences of Baby Halder through these words. "But the owners did not like their servants talking to each other. If they saw their servants sitting, standing or just talking, they would immediately pull them up." (Halder, 127). At times, they will have to involve in demeaning tasks. Nevertheless, if employers do any favour in the lives of domestic workers, they make use of them as much as they can. Baby's words reflect these: "I was the one who was made to work the hardest – perhaps she thought that since she had given me room to live with my children, she had a greater claim on my time." (Halder, 130). Sometimes these people have to face recriminations from the employers if there is any discrepancy or delay in the work. Baby Halder says: "Some days, if I was late I would get a shouting." (Halder, 129). However, over the years women domestic work has been ingrained in the mindset of the people. It is often seen as menial occupation and unskilled work as women have traditionally been considered capable of doing those works. "The domestic workers are expected to be compliant, unassertive and helpless with their employers" (England and Stiell, 1997:08). The life has been completely suspended by the pandemic, especially it is even more skewed for women domestic workers because of the increased long hours of unpaid work. It is true that our society is blind to the woes of domestic workers even before the pandemic. Baby remarks despairingly "Back at the house, memsahib gave me job after job: do this, no do that, finish this first..." (Halder, 131). "Look, this girl also needs some rest. Why don't you give her a bit of time off? I'm sure she'd like to spend a little time with her children..." (Halder, 129). Most of the domestic workers are from the lower economic strata. Though they make up one of the world's most widespread workforce, they are the most unprotected ones. Some of them will have to confront sexual exploitation either from the homes they work or from the surroundings they live, especially if they are living alone. In her book Baby Halder explains her excruciating experiences while she confronted her land lord's son. "If I wanted to stay on in this house, I'd have to make sure he was happy, and I knew what that meant. I felt a tremendous sense of resignation and despair – if there was no man in the house, did that mean I would have to listen to anyone who decided he had a right over my life?" (Halder, 145)

Certainly, at times, they might get more respect and comfort from the pet dog than the employer. Baby recounts her emotional relationship with the pet dog in the home she works. "The family I worked with had a dog called Kesfo. He gave me much more love and attention than that family ever did. When I was sad, he would come and cuddle up to me, lick my feet, nuzzle me with his nose. He understood my sadness." (Halder, 131). Baby Halder recounts unenterable occurrences in her life while being employed as a domestic help. Most often casteism made its ugly appearance. The snide remarks of her employer that a neighbour can hold a

baby's daughter but not her child exposes the ugly reality of casteism by all means. Memsahib and sahib often went out and came back very late, sometimes around two or three in the morning, and I had to stay awake for them and let them in when they came. As the domestic workers are scared of the termination from their work, most of the time they will have to bear the maltreatment and humiliation from the employers. The deplorable plight Baby went through in her employer's house is exhibited in these words: "At the moment, I have to leave my small children behind and come this far to work and who knows what they have to listen to in my absence. Then when I get back after work, they come running to me, crying out "Ma, Ma!" in such pathetic voices that I feel terrible, and every day they ask me why I am so late. How can I tell them that if you are working for someone else, you can only be free when they give you their permission?" (Halder, 128). Apart from the unduly hours of work they will have to tolerate the ruthless attitude of the employers. One day when Baby Halder went to meet her son on the way back from the market Memsahib was annoyed with her for being late. She rages very severely. "Yes, yes, go. Go every day why don't you? Leave your work and go off, wander about outside." (Halder, 131)

There is a remarkable quote by Virginia Woolf, i.e., "a woman must have money and a room for her own if she is to write fiction." So, for women to come forward and to survive against all the odds in life, she needs financial independence and a supporting space. Only then she can unveil the hidden capabilities and virulent desires inside the heart. But the dire impact of pandemic on domestic workers lessened their chances to escape from the poverty-stricken circumstances. Nevertheless, the lack of a supporting environment stirs up hornet's nest in their life. In Baby Halder's work she speaks through this multitude of Indian domestic workers. With the assistance of the constant encouragement from his last employer named Prabodh Kumar, a retired anthropology professor she could unveil her hidden potentials. His words "Baby Just focus on your reading and writing... for the moment leave things as they are..." (Halder 151). These words could bring perceptible change in the life of Baby Halder and she could come and open a way for her who has the adroitness of a seasoned writer. She could savour each and every moment and sky rocket the spasm of emotions and passions in her life through her work. So striking the metamorphosis of Baby Halder from a submissive woman to a tenacious writer, who has published three books, which have been translated into 24 languages. In addition to this, most often, she travels across the country to speak at literary festivals. She could achieve the accomplishment as a widely known writer mainly because of the supporting space and persistent encouragement she received. In a way to redefine her own being a woman needs self-representation and creates her own space which may help her liberate herself from sexual and cast stigmatisation. Nonetheless Baby Halder's literary spirit and the act of her reading and writing aided her to escape from the drudgeries of poverty and unveil her invisible talents. "You're like my daughter, and you are now the daughter of this house. Don't ever think that you don't belong here." (Halder, 141). Though they perform multiple activities in the life of several people, a large number of obstacles expedite multi-faceted inconveniences. There are the words of Baby Halder when she told The Times of India while she was talking about the plight of a young domestic help. "If a child feels like eating a biscuit and steals some from the employer's shelf, what crime has she committed? I remember an employer had banged a kid's head for eating biscuits." Indeed, Baby Halder's autobiography serves as a testimony to the abhorrent situations of numerous undocumented stories of women in our society.

Though the government has taken the first steps for tackling the issue of underpaid agricultural work by starting The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005). Still, they are not given due recognition and the unpaid domestic work still has not been legitimised. For equality, not only the participation of women in the workforce is needed, but the current patriarchal definition of work has to be redefined. This may enhance women's quality of life and ungender domestic work. While the domestic work is delegitimized as women's work and women's prerogative, they remain socially unrecognised always. A review of Baby Halder's book in the newspaper 'The Hindu' remarks "This is not a book that can be read and tossed aside. It raises questions about the fate of the millions of domestic workers in our country and their ill treatment." A drastic change from traumatic childhood to emerging star on India's literary horizon provides confidence for millions of impoverished Indian women. In a way, the memoirs and autobiographies help to ease both the mental dilemmas and physical dilemmas in one's lives. It paves the way for self-development as well. As Brubaker

pointed out in his book "In constructing relations between who we are, and what we experience, we create the autobiographies that make sense of our own development." (Brubaker, 106). Certainly, through her memoir, Baby Halder could present the development of herself from a subordinated woman, who tolerated the disastrous abuses of her family and husband to a woman to a vibrant woman who could break all the boundaries and created a space of her own. In an interview she says "There are so many other women in India who have left home like me. There is no support for them; life is not easy, and they are not able to speak out. If I can give them some confidence, then I will be satisfied". Her book illustrates the grim existence of impecunious Indian women, the domestic chaos and how the treatment of society stigmatizes them and push to the periphery. Baby had relocated to Kolkata in 2016. After that she joined the NGO 'Apne Aap Women's World' there and started teaching children of sex workers in several places such as Sonagachi. She gives advice and guidance for them as she has a story of her own to show them nothing is impossible.

The deprivations and the indignities they are subjected to is mainly owing to the inadequacy in the laws and policies which results in the continued exploitation of domestic workers. "They have no medical insurance and all expenses of illness, hospitalization of self and family are borne by the worker. The caste and social stratification have increased the probability of individuals to enter domestic work. The domestic workers have limited access to larger social networks." (Neetha, 2004:23). It is pathetic that even labour laws in India do not cater to issues of these groups of people. As a matter of fact, the two existing policies regarding domestic workers are: Unorganized Workers Act, 2008 and Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place Act, 2013. But unfortunately, both are inadequate to address the grievances of the domestic workers. Indeed, there have been several attempts at passing laws to ensure and protect the rights of domestic workers, but nothing has been formalised now. So the need of the moment is that the government should consider bringing new legislation to protect their rights. "The Central and State Governments are obliged to take effective measures to include domestic workers in the existing labour legislations and ensure equivalent protection due to the specific nature of their work" (Ghosh, 2013:09). The involvement of Central and State governments is necessary for the implementation of various acts regarding the progress of domestic workers. A comprehensive legislation and administrative system are needed to strengthen the rights of the domestic workers in India.

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